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ABSTRACT

Choosing a college is a major decision for many high school students. A study was conducted to determine at what point in his/her life a student makes college plans, what factors influence college choice, and what information resources students use in choosing a college. College freshmen (N=3,708) completed questionnaires concerning their college choice decision-making process. Subjects indicated: (1) their ideal and actual distance between college and home; (2) when they began college planning and when their final decision was made; (3) whether they had considered each of 15 factors in making their choice; (4) which college information sources they had used; and (5) characteristics of their chosen college. The results revealed that most respondents had begun their college planning before their senior year in high school and had made their final decision during their senior year. Top factors considered by subjects included the academic reputation of the college, the quality of available programs, costs, faculty reputation, and friendliness of the school. Males and females differed on 10 of 15 factors, while blacks and whites differed on only 4 of 15 factors. College students, friends, and the high school counselor were the three information sources most frequently reported by all subgroups studied. School counselors were the information source most frequently used by blacks, while college students were used most frequently by other groups. The paper concludes by noting some implications of these findings for school counselors. (References and 10 data tables are appended.) (NB)

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COUNSELOR IMPACT UPON COLLEGE CHOICE

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This study was concerned with primary influences upon the student's choice of a college to attend and, more particularly, with the counselor's impact upon college choice. College choice has been described as a four-step process that includes deciding to attend college, developing a college list, making application decisions/submitting the application, and being accepted/determining a final college choice (Gilmour, et al., 1981).

The reputation of the institution and/or the particular academic program of interest to the student has typically been found to be the primary influence upon the student's college choice (Douglas & Powers, 1985); Nelson & Poremba (1980; Powers, et al., 1982), although cost is as often a primary factor regardless of a student's SAT score (Gilmour, et al., 1981).

Other primary influences identified include social climate (Gilmour, et al., 1981); people, including parents, counselors, teachers, alumni, teachers, and friends (Chapman, 1981; Gilmour, et al., 1981); student characteristics such as SES, aptitude, levels of educational aspiration, and high school performance (Chapman, 1981; Dewbowski, 1980); location and distance from home (Chapman, 1981; Nelson and Poremba, 1980); and general expectation of college life (Chapman, 1981).

First thoughts concerning college occur during the grade school for nearly two-thirds of the students and in the junior high school

for over 80 per cent. Students with higher SAT scores and parents with college backgrounds tend to make decisions at an earlier age (Gilmour, et al., 1981). Over half of the students decide to attend college during the early years of high school and nearly all have decided before the end of the senior year. An early decision is linked with a higher SAT score, but is not correlated with parental college background (Gilmore, et al., 1981). Counselors, in the Gilmour study, had a greater impact upon students receiving low SAT scores, as opposed to those with high scores, in deciding whether or not to attend college. High SAT scorers tended to list parents and career plans as their primary influence. When considering specific colleges to which they might apply, however, the Gilmour study found that 90 per cent of the high SAT scorers considered the high school counselor and the college as primary information sources. Approximately half of the low SAT scorers relied upon counselors and colleges, while the remainder considered relatives and friends as primary sources.

Most college admissions officers and high school counselors view the counselor as influential in helping students choose a college and in providing accurate college information. Counselors see an even greater need for college advising during the next ten years (Dominick, et al., 1980b). During the past decade, the mood of college admissions has switched from an era of student selection to one of student recruitment involving increasingly sophisticated marketing procedures that have been adopted from the world of business (Dominick, et al., 1980a; Kotler, 1976; Litten, Sullivan & Brodigan, 1983; Zemski & Oedel, 1983). The concensus of college admissions officers is that their future operations will be marked by greater use of marketing techniques to attract students and more aggressive recruiting

strategies (Dominick, et al., 1980b). With top students already receiving unsolicited material from 50-75 colleges (Chapman & Johnson, 1979) and predictions that colleges will increasingly rely upon direct mailing of printed material (Chapman, 1980), it is no surprise that over half of the high school counselors see as one of their primary functions the protection of students from aggressive college recruiting practices (Dominick, et al., 1980b). Abuses from misguided or excessive marketing have already been addressed (Litten, 1980; Litten, 1981; Lovelock & Rothschild, 1980).

PURPOSE

This study was conducted to determine (a) the point in time within the student's life when college plans were were first made and a final choice determined, (b) the factors considered and their relative importance in making a college choice, and (c) the information resources used by high school students in considering colleges they might attend.

METHOD

This descriptive study used a questionnaire to survey college freshmen entering a large midwestern university concerning their college choice decision-making process.

Sample

The sample consisted of 3708 freshmen (2081 females and 1627 males) who responded to a request to fill out a questionnaire during freshman orientation in the summer of 1985. This response represented 55 per cent of the freshman class. A comparison of the sample and the population data for this class from university records revealed no significant differences between the sample and the population on sex,

race, or academic major. The sample is categorized by sex, race, academic major, and ACT scores in Table I.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was developed and tested with the 1984 freshman class. It then was used for this study of the 1985-86 freshman class in the summer of 1985. Students were asked to print their names and student numbers on the questionnaire so that responses could be compared across several variables on the three pages of the questionnaire. Only summary data were made available for analysis. Individual student information was held confidential.

The questionnaire asked for five kinds of information. First, students were asked to indicate their ideal and actual distance from college to home by responding to six distance categories (e.g., under 10 miles, 10-24 miles). Second, they were asked to indicate when they had begun their college planning and when they had made their final decision. Six time categories were used (e. g., before junior year in high school, junior year). Third, they were asked to indicate whether or not they considered each of 19 factors (e. g., cost, prestige, academic reputation). They were asked to indicate the importance of each factor on a five-point scale. Fourth, they were given a list of college information sources (e. g., family, counselor, friends). Students were to indicate which of these they used in considering a college. Finally, they were asked to review several characteristics of the college they finally selected and assign a rating on a five-point scale to each characteristic. Data reported in this study are from the second, third., and fourth parts only. The first and fifth parts are not reported here.

Analysis

The questionnaire was printed on mark-sense answer sheets. A data file was developed for these data using the university's main-frame computer. The summary data for this research report came from both these data and student records maintained by the university admissions office, enabling the data to be analyzed separately for females and males, for Blacks and Whites, each college major, and each of four ACT score categories.

RESULTS

When are college plans made? These college freshmen began making their college plans well before their senior year in high school. These results are shown in TABLE II. More than one-third of the sample reported beginning their college planning before their junior year, and by the end of the junior year more than 80 per cent had begun the planning process. Only five per cent waited until their senior year to start planning.

Only about 10 per cent had made their college choice before their senior year in high school, as shown in TABLE III. Approximately 70 per cent made their final choice during their senior year and less than 20 per cent waited until after high school graduation to finally decide.

What qualities did these students look for in a college? Students were asked to indicate which of 15 college characteristics they considered when they made their college decision. They were also asked to rate the importance of each factor considered on a five-point scale. A rating of 1 indicated slightly important, 2 somewhat, 3 moderately, 4 rather, and 5 very important. Academic reputation and the quality of available programs were considered by over 90 per cent

of the students and were rated as being the most important characteristics. TABLE IV shows the percentage of students considering each factor and the mean rating and standard deviations for each factor rated.

Cost was a factor considered by 80 per cent of the students and had a mean rating of 3.90, indicating it to be important in their college considerations. Only slightly over half (55%) reported the offer of financial aid to be important. This factor may well have been important to those who believed they might meet requirements for aid and not to those who could not qualify. This item had the largest variance in ratings. The preference of friends, the preference of family, and the athletic program were rated as least important of the factors considered, with none of these three rated as even moderately important.

The data from this part of the questionnaire were also analyzed by sex, race, and ACT scores. TABLE V shows how females and males responded to these 15 factors. The rank order of these 15 factors by importance was nearly the same for females and males. The one exception was that men rated athletic programs above family preference and women did not. Men rated extracurricular activities, athletic programs, and friend's preference as more important than did women. These differences were statistically significant. Since multiple t-tests were used to test the significance of the differences, a conservative alpha level of .0005 was used. Women students rated academic reputation, quality of available program, friendliness of the school, size, campus beauty, and distance from home as more important than did men. No differences between males and females were found for costs, financial aid offered, prestige, familiarity with the school, or family preference. For both men and women, factors that pertained

to the quality and reputation of the school and to costs and financial aid were regarded as most important.

Using the above mentioned level of significance when analyzing the results by race or ethnic origin, differences were found for these factors: academic reputation, costs, financial aid offered, and distance from home. These factors were more important for Blacks than for Whites. Other ethnic groups were small in number and differences between these groups and Whites, and differences among themselves were not significant. These results by race are shown in TABLE VI.

TABLE VII presents the results of the same data but grouped by four ACT score ranges. The factors academic reputation, quality of available programs, and cost were seen as most important by students regardless of ACT scores. Distance from home, family preference, athletic programs, and friend's preference were least important for all groups.

What resources do students use when exploring college choices? Students in this study were asked to indicate which of nine sources of information they used in selecting a college. The per cent of the sample reporting use of each of the sources is shown for males and females in TABLE VIII. For both males and females the most often identified resources were college students, friends, and high school counselors. Nearly seventy per cent of the students surveyed said that they used these people as resources. The counselor was identified as a resource more often than parents or high school teachers. Mass media provided information to less than one in five of these students.

These same data were analyzed by race, as shown in TABLE VIII. Blacks were more apt than Whites to use the high school counselor for

and less likely to use their family for college information. For Blacks, the counselor was the most frequent source of information.

The use of various college information sources by students in various ACT score ranges is shown in TABLE X. The rankings of the various information sources by use was approximately the same regardless of ACT score. These data indicate greater use of counselors by students with lower ACT scores and less by students with high scores. Seventy-six per cent of the students with ACT scores between 0 and 15 used a high school counselor for college information, compared with 68 per cent of the students with scores between 26 and 36. High ACT score students were slightly more apt to use college publications than were those with low scores.

DISCUSSION

As has previously been found, most college freshmen in this sample began their college planning before their senior year in high school and made their college choice during their senior year. The academic reputation of the college, the quality of available program, costs, faculty reputation, and friendliness of the school were among the top factors considered by these students when they made their college choice. These findings are also consistent with those of previous studies.

Far more differences were found in the weight given factors when examined by sex than by race. Males and females differed on 10 of the 15 factors, while Blacks and Whites differed on only four of the 15 factors. Men rated athletic programs slightly higher than did women, but both men and women rated athletics among the factors of least importance. Black students gave more importance to costs and to the offer of financial aid than did White students.

Great similarity in ratings assigned was noted across all groups with regard to factors that influenced college choice as well as information sources used. All sub-groups -- males, females, Blacks, Whites, and all four ACT score groups -- rated academic reputation and quality of available program as the two most important factors in determining college choice from among the 15 choice factors listed. All sub-groups except Blacks rated cost as the third most important factor. The mean ratings assigned by Blacks indicated that financial aid was given more weight than cost.

Of the nine leading information sources used by students, information gained from college students, friends, and the high school counselor were the three sources most frequently reported by all sub-groups studied -- females and males, Blacks and Whites, and students in each of the four ACT score categories. School counselors were the information source most frequently used by Blacks, while college students were the most frequently reported source by males, females, Whites, and the four ACT score categories.

Several important implications for school counselors can be noted from the study results. First, counselors should be aware of the relatively brief time interval in the life of students from their first exploration of colleges to their final choice of institution. Most of this activity is confined to parts of the junior and senior years of high school. Second, counselors may well be a more important information source for Black than White students, and low-SAT scorers as opposed to high-scorers. Special ways of extending service to these sub-groups may be needed during this crucial period of decision-making. Finally, because financial aid supports are especially important for Black students, counselors should be aware of

sources of aid targeted for these students and the qualifications for being granted this aid, and make this information readily available to them early in their college selection process.

Results of this study support earlier findings concerning the early college planning of high school students, the emphasis upon institutional quality factors in college choice, and the similarity of primary information sources across all groups studied.

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Table I

CHARACTERISTICS OF SAMPLE (N=3708)

CATEGORY	N	%
SEX		
Female	2081	53
Male	1627	47
RACE/ETHNIC		
White	3324	89
Black	245	7
Asian	61	2
Hispanic	36	1
Other	38	1
MAJOR		
Agriculture	66	2
Arts Letters	121	3
Business	718	19
Com Art	258	7
Education	57	2
Engineering	597	15
Hum Ecology	55	1
Nat Sci	487	13
Nursing	62	2
Soc Sci	355	10
Vet Med	130	4
No Pref	798	22
ACT SCORES		
1-15	171	5
16-20	821	22
21-25	1593	43
26-36	919	25
No ACT	200	5

TABLE II

PROPORTION WHO BEGAN MAKING COLLEGE PLANS

	N	BEFORE JR YEAR	JUNIOR YEAR	SUMMER BEFORE SR YR	1st HALF SR YEAR	2nd HALF SR YEAR	AFTER H.S.GRAD
FEMALES	2081	42%	40%	13%	5%	0%	0%
MALES	1627	34%	48%	13%	5%	0%	0%
TOTAL	3708	38%	44%	13%	5%	0%	0%

TABLE III

PROPORTION WHO MADE FINAL CHOICE OF A COLLEGE (N=3708)

	N	BEFORE JR YEAR	JUNIOR YEAR	SUMMER BEFORE SR YR	1st HALF SR YEAR	2nd Half SR YEAR	AFTER H.S.GRAD
FEMALES	2081	0%	3%	10%	31%	38%	18%
MALES	1627	0%	2%	8%	31%	43%	16%
TOTAL	3708	0%	2.5%	9%	31%	40.5%	17%

TABLE IV

Ratings of Importance of Factors in Making a College Choice

FACTOR	% CONSIDERED	MEAN RATING	STANDARD DEVIATION
Academic Reputation	98.2	4.50	.54
Quality of Available Program	94.3	4.48	.63
Cost	83.0	3.90	1.32
Faculty Reputation	68.6	3.73	1.34
Friendliness of School	80.1	3.70	1.13
Financial Aid Offered	56.6	3.54	2.18
Prestige	81.3	3.49	.78
Extracurricular Activities	79.6	3.48	.70
Size	72.1	3.46	1.17
Campus Beauty	73.0	3.12	1.40
Familiarity with School	55.2	3.08	1.55
Distance from Home	49.0	3.09	1.44
Family Preference	41.2	2.80	1.78
Athletic Program	39.0	2.35	1.70
Friend's Preference	24.8	2.06	1.48

TABLE V

MEAN RATINGS OF COLLEGE CHOICE FACTORS BY SEX

FACTORS	FEMALE			MALE			TOTAL		
	MEAN	SD	N	MEAN	SD	N	MEAN	SD	N
*Academic Reputation	4.56	.72	2029	4.42	.75	1536	4.50	.74	3565
*Quality of Available Program	4.52	.72	1953	4.38	.82	1476	4.46	.80	3429
Costs	3.95	1.14	1931	3.80	1.15	1398	3.90	1.15	3329
*Faculty Reputation	3.80	1.14	1798	3.64	1.17	1296	3.73	1.16	3094
*Friendliness of School	3.83	1.08	1857	3.53	1.08	1319	3.70	1.09	3176
Financial Aid Offered	3.56	1.50	1655	3.52	1.44	1153	3.54	1.48	2808
Prestige	3.50	1.13	1885	3.47	1.13	1373	3.49	1.13	3258
*Size	3.52	1.06	1897	3.37	1.10	1310	3.46	1.08	3207
*Extracurricular Activities	3.20	1.16	1842	3.40	1.16	1364	3.28	1.16	3206
*Campus Beauty	3.19	1.18	1861	3.01	1.18	1325	3.12	1.18	3186
Familiarity with School	3.10	1.24	1632	3.05	1.26	1163	3.08	1.24	2795
*Distance from Home	3.11	1.21	1942	2.93	1.18	1389	3.04	1.20	3331
Family Preference	2.64	1.34	1541	2.54	1.33	1058	2.60	1.34	2599
*Athletic Program	2.38	1.25	1509	2.80	1.32	1165	2.56	1.30	2674
*Friend's Preference	1.97	1.20	1353	2.18	1.23	939	2.05	1.22	2292

*Difference between males and females significant (t-test, $p<.0005$).

TABLE VI

MEAN RATINGS OF COLLEGE CHOICE FACTORS BY RACE OR ETHNIC ORIGIN

FACTORS	BLACK			WHITE		
	MEAN	SD	N	MEAN	SD	N
*Academic Reputation	4.72	.66	233	4.48	.74	3207
Quality of Available Program	4.58	.79	227	4.45	.79	3082
*Cost	4.38	.98	223	3.86	1.15	2987
Faculty Reputation	3.96	1.21	205	3.71	1.15	2779
Friendliness of School	3.90	1.17	216	3.69	1.09	2851
*Financial Aid Offered	4.46	1.02	213	3.46	1.49	2498
Prestige	3.76	1.10	216	3.46	1.13	2926
Size	3.65	1.20	215	3.44	1.07	2891
Extracurricular Activities	3.33	1.20	216	3.28	1.16	2877
Campus Beauty	3.15	1.24	209	3.11	1.18	2860
Familiarity with School	3.33	1.25	197	3.06	1.24	2495
*Distance from Home	3.51	1.31	226	3.00	1.19	2985
Family Preference	2.89	1.43	192	2.57	1.32	2306
Athletic Program	2.60	1.31	188	2.56	1.30	2383
Friend's Preference	2.20	1.33	175	2.03	1.20	2023

*Difference between means for Blacks and Whites significant (t-test, $p<.0005$).

TABLE VII

MEAN RATINGS OF COLLEGE CHOICE FACTORS BY ACT SCORES

FACTORS		ACT SCORES 0-15	16-20	21-25	26-36
Academic Reputation	X	4.62	4.50	4.48	4.51
	SD	.73	.76	.74	.71
	N	159	779	1532	900
Quality of Available Program	X	4.45	4.42	4.43	4.53
	SD	.86	.83	.81	.72
	N	154	736	1482	864
Cost	X	4.33	3.95	3.84	3.88
	SD	1.08	1.59	1.46	1.39
	N	153	742	1427	838
Faculty Reputation	X	4.01	3.78	3.68	3.76
	SD	1.19	1.19	1.16	1.09
	N	147	691	1339	748
Friendliness of School	X	3.93	3.81	3.64	3.68
	SD	1.17	1.10	1.08	1.08
	N	151	700	1374	780
Financial Aid Offered	X	4.11	3.44	3.49	3.60
	SD	1.31	1.59	1.46	1.39
	N	138	633	1198	700
Prestige	X	3.78	3.57	3.48	3.34
	SD	1.16	1.15	1.12	1.13
	N	149	726	1423	789
Size	X	3.63	3.51	3.44	3.40
	SD	1.24	1.10	1.06	1.04
	N	150	692	1384	803
Extracurricular	X	3.46	3.30	3.26	3.26
	SD	1.20	1.20	1.15	1.13
	N	147	721	1380	785
Campus Beauty	X	3.33	3.21	3.10	3.01
	SD	1.36	1.21	1.14	1.18
	N	155	707	1385	771
Familiarity with School	X	3.58	3.27	3.05	2.90
	SD	1.29	1.24	1.23	1.22
	N	140	633	1217	672
Distance from Home	X	3.32	3.12	3.02	2.92
	SD	1.31	1.26	1.16	1.16
	N	155	745	1432	821

TABLE VII (Con't.)

Family Preference	X	3.09	2.74	2.56	2.38
	SD	1.45	1.40	1.31	1.23
	N	138	604	1132	593
Athletic Program	X	2.92	2.72	2.53	2.33
	SD	1.42	1.31	1.29	1.23
	N	135	643	1148	603
Friend's Preference	X	2.25	2.21	2.03	1.90
	SD	132	1.31	1.19	1.12
	N	132	549	998	509

TABLE VIII
PER CENT USING EACH COLLEGE INFORMATION SOURCE

INFO SOURCE	FEMALE (N=2081)	MALE (N=1627)	TOTAL (N=3708)
College Students	80%	72%	77%
Friends	73	69	72
HS Counselor	73	67	70
College Publication	64	58	61
Family	62	59	61
Alumni	56	51	54
HS Teacher	54	50	52
Newspaper	21	17	19
TV	11	12	11

TABLE IX
PER CENT USING EACH COLLEGE INFORMATION SOURCE
BY RACE OR ETHNIC ORIGIN

INFO SOURCE	WHITE (N=3324)	BLACK (N=245)
College Students	78%	68%
Friends	72	70
HS Counselor	70	78
College Publication	61	67
Family	62	47
Alumni	55	46
HS Teacher	52	59
Newspaper	19	28
TV	11	17

TABLE X
PER CENT USING EACH COLLEGE INFORMATION SOURCE
BY ACT SCORES

INFO SOURCE	ACT SCORES 0-15 (N=171)	16-20 (N=821)	21-25 (N=1593)	26-36 (N=919)
College Students	75%	84%	78%	74%
Friends	78	74	75	68
HS Counselor	76	72	72	68
College Publication	56	55	61	67
Family	60	62	60	62
Alumni	46	54	53	59
HS Teacher	56	53	53	52
Newspaper	29	19	20	17
TV	18	13	12	8